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AUTHOR	Hoffman, Catherine C.; Jackson, Stephanie; Osher, David
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ABSTRACT

This brief paper summarizes findings from research on effective school practices that reduce violence and frequency of behavior problems. It finds that research on schools supports a comprehensive three-level approach to prevention as the most efficient and cost-effective way to reduce violence. Such an approach involves first, a schoolwide foundation that provides all students with necessary supports for learning and behavior; second, early intervention with specific students demonstrating behavior problems; and third, intensive interventions with students whose emotional and behavioral problems require it. The paper also offers guidelines for the creation of a schoolwide comprehensive violence prevention and response plan. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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ED 464 458

Safe Schools-Healthy Students: Putting Research Based Knowledge into Practice

Catherine C. Hoffman
Stephanie Jackson
David Osher

Introduction

Safe and effective schools are positive, responsive places—they promote mental wellness by establishing strong connections between children, youth, and adults. These schools prevent difficulties by implementing schoolwide universal interventions, and they respond to those in need of assistance in caring and effective ways. This approach forms a foundation that enables schools to meet the mental health and academic needs of children and families experiencing the most serious emotional and behavioral problems (Cotton, 1995; Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, & Hanley, 1998).

There is ample documentation that prevention and intervention efforts can reduce violence and the frequency and intensity of behavior problems in schools (Coie & Jacobs, 1993; Elias & Tobias, 1996; Hunter & Elias, 1998). Research-based practices can help school communities recognize the warning signs of violence early, so children can get the help they need before it is too late. In fact, research suggests that some of the most promising prevention and intervention strategies involve the entire educational community—administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community agencies—working together to form positive relationships with all children (Cornell, 1998; Quinn et al., 1998).

A Comprehensive Three-level Approach to Prevention and Intervention

Research on safe schools demonstrates that a comprehensive three-level approach to prevention is the most efficient and cost-effective way to reduce the risk of violence.

Schoolwide Foundation. While some students learn and behave appropriately in almost any school environment, others require some level of support to help them realize high academic and behavioral standards. A schoolwide foundation provides all students with the supports and skills they need to become effective learners and problem solvers. In addition, the foundation provides students and staff with the supports and skills they need to develop and foster appropriate behaviors and healthy emotional adjustment. The University of Oregon's Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior found that most schools with effective schoolwide systems that focus on learning and behavior can prevent at least 80 percent of problematic student behaviors (Colvin, Kameenui, & Sugai, 1993).

A comprehensive schoolwide foundation should help ensure that a school is safe and responsive to all children. *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*, identified 13 characteristics as being essential to such a safe and responsive school (see sidebar, *Characteristics of a school that is safe and responsive to all children*). These approaches alone will not address fully the needs of *all* students; however, an effective foundation makes it easier to identify students who require additional interventions and increases the effectiveness of all interventions—both early and intensive.

Early Intervention. With an effective foundation in place, most schools will experience a significant reduction in student behavioral problems. Preventing and greatly reducing such problems schoolwide makes it easier for staff to focus attention on specific students whose behaviors signal a need for early intervention. Students who continue to experience behavioral problems, despite schoolwide prevention activities, may be exhibiting early warning signs of violence (see sidebar, *Early warning signs of violence*) and their problem behaviors indicate a need for early intervention. Early intervention is necessary for those 10 to 15 percent of students who are at risk of academic failure or behavior problems. Along with an appropriate foundation, early intervention is sufficient for almost all students.

In the majority of schools, a team of trained professionals already exists to provide consultation, evaluation, and intervention for students who are struggling academically, behaviorally, and socially. Safe schools will typically create such a team or expand the focus of this team to include a response to individual students who exhibit early warning signs.

EC 308 970

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Characteristics of a School That is Safe and Responsive to All Children

- Focus on academic achievement
- Involve families in meaningful ways
- Develop links to the community
- Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff
- Discuss safety issues openly
- Treat students with equal respect
- Create ways for students to share their concerns
- Help children feel safe expressing their feelings
- Have in place a system for referring children who are suspected of being abused or neglected
- Offer extended day programs for children
- Promote good citizenship and character
- Identify problems and assess progress toward solutions
- Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace

From Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998

When a child or youth exhibits early warning signs, the school can no longer rely on schoolwide interventions alone. Rather, a Student Support Team, working with the teacher, child, and parents, must develop interventions that specifically address the child's behaviors of concern. Early intervention requires a referral process that can respond in a timely, coordinated, and effective manner.

The approaches used to build a schoolwide foundation to prevent behavior problems, along with the early intervention strategies, should address the needs of those students who continue to experience behavior problems and who are at risk for academic failure or further behavior problems. There will still be a small group of students, however, whose behavior problems are not helped by these first two levels of prevention and intervention. They will require more intensive interventions.

Intensive Interventions. Intensive interventions are necessary for those students whose needs cannot be fully addressed by early intervention. Specific interventions and their intensity will depend on the nature, severity, and frequency of each child's emotional and behavioral problems. Frequently, students who require intensive interventions, services, and supports are experiencing moderate to severe emotional and behavioral disorders that significantly impair their functioning and quality of life across the domains of family, school, peers, and community. In many situations, these students are often eligible for special education services or have a mental health diagnosis.

Safe schools implement intensive interventions that include a full array of services and supports and that coordinate the resources of the school and other community agencies, such as individualized special education services or interagency wraparound supports. This array of services and supports should be individualized to meet the unique needs of each child and family, and should always be individualized to a child's needs *and* strengths. The Student Support Teams should work with other community agencies to tailor services and supports to the needs of each child and family.

Safe Schools Combine All Three Levels

For a school to be safe for all children, all three levels must be in place. A school that builds a schoolwide foundation will still fail if it ignores the needs of children at risk of severe academic or behavioral problems or children who are seriously troubled. Overall, a schoolwide foundation will meet the needs of most students, while early intervention will address the needs of most of the other students. Individualized intensive interventions will be needed for a relatively small number of students.

Creating Comprehensive Violence Prevention and Response Plans

Plans to prevent and respond to episodes of violence also should consider both prevention and intervention. Effective schools create a violence prevention and response plan, and form a team that can ensure its implementation. They use approaches and strategies based on research about what works.

Creating the Violence Prevention and Response Plan. A sound violence prevention and response plan reflects both the common and unique needs of educators, students, families, and the greater community. The plan should outline how all individuals in the school community—administrators, teachers, parents, students, paraprofessionals, support staff—will be prepared to spot the behavioral and emotional signs that indicate a child is troubled, and what they will need to do. The plan also details how school and community resources can be used to create safe environments and to manage responses to acute threats and incidents of violence (Cornell, 1998; Poland, 1994).

An effective written plan includes:

- Descriptions of the early warning signs of potentially violent behavior and procedures for identifying children who exhibit these signs.
- Descriptions of effective prevention practices the school community has undertaken to build a foundation that is responsive to all children and enhances the effectiveness of interventions.
- Descriptions of intervention strategies the school community can use to help troubled children. These include early interventions for students who are at risk of behavioral problems, and more intensive, individualized interventions and resources for students with severe behavioral problems or mental health needs.
- A crisis intervention plan that includes immediate responses for imminent warning signs and violent behavior, as well as a contingency plan to be used in the aftermath of a tragedy.

The plan must be consistent with federal, state, and local laws. It also should have the support of families and the local school board. Plans will prove most meaningful when the entire school community is involved in developing and implementing the plan (Colvin, Sugai, & Kameenui, 1993; Cornell, 1998). It can be helpful to establish or adapt an existing school-based team to oversee the preparation and implementation of the prevention and response plan. In addition, everyone should be provided with relevant training and support on a regular basis (Riley, 1996). Finally, there should be a clearly delineated mechanism for monitoring and assessing violence prevention efforts.

Conclusion

While we cannot prevent all violence from occurring, we can do much to reduce the likelihood of its occurrence. Through thoughtful planning and the implementation of a three-tiered approach that includes schoolwide prevention, early intervention, and more intensive intervention techniques, and with the establishment of a school violence prevention and response team and plan, we can avert many crises and be prepared when they do happen.

These procedures are discussed more thoroughly in the publications *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* and *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*. These documents are available through the U.S. Department of Education by calling toll-free 1-877-4ED-PUBS or can be downloaded from the following website: http://www.air.org/cecp/guide/actionguide.htm.

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CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Catherine C. Hoffman
Stephanie Jackson
David Osher

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, American Institutes for Research, 1000 Thomas Jefferson Street, NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20007, 202/944-5300, Toll-free 1-888 457-1551, Fax: 202/944-5408, TTY: 1-877-334-3499, E-mail: center@air.org, Website: www.air.org/cecp